

shall swallow you, and perhaps then I'll love Things as much as people do!"

All around the walls, the cheap and unloved Things wailed and shivered and sobbed in their cages. "Not the boy! *Not the boy!*"

"You're pleading for him?" jeered the Loser, his searchlight eyes sweeping the cages where the poor cheap Things were cowering. "Humans made you, cast you aside, and forgot you—it's all their fault you were sent to the Wastes! You're cheap and you're ugly, and your owners thought you worthless! You should be glad to watch a human die, before I chew you to pieces!"

But Jack had just had an idea. He knew it might be too late, but it was the only thing he could think of that might work. "Listen!" he shouted to all the Things in their cages, while he still clung to the Christmas Pig's trotter. "I'm human and I care about you! You aren't garbage to me, and I know how to get you out of here!"

And with these words, the giant padlock on the Christmas Pig's cage shattered. The Things all around the cavern walls gasped in shock and then, one by one, all around the cavern, more padlocks began to burst apart, then more, then even more. The Loser shrieked in rage and shock, but Jack knew what had happened. He'd given the Things hope, which no lock can contain. Now a few of the bravest began clambering out of their cages, helping one another as they went.

"There's a way out for all of you, I promise!" shouted Jack to all the shivering Things still too scared to leave their prisons. "You've just got to believe!"

"Get back!" shrieked the Loser, enraged to see the Things escaping. "He's lying! Get back! BACK! I shall eat all those who climb out first!"

"I'm not lying!" Jack shouted. "If everyone hopes and believes—"

And then something extraordinary happened—something simply magnificent. It could only have happened on the night for miracles and lost causes, and only then because Jack had refused to give up hope, because nothing can be lost for good until all hope has gone . . .

Up in the dark wooden sky above the Loser's Lair, where there'd been no finding holes at all, the sky cracked. The monstrous Loser looked up at the sound of the sky breaking open and screamed in fury. A hole had appeared there, but it wasn't dark, like an ordinary finding hole. Sparkling light was whooshing around inside it, as though it contained moving magic, and Jack knew what the magic was, because once, long ago, when he was only three years old, he'd imagined DP whooshing around inside a hole just like that, on a magical bicycle.

"This is your way back to the Land of the Living!" he cried. "Keep hoping!"

The hole grew larger and larger. It was wide and golden, and then the real magic happened: instead of dropping a single shaft of golden light, and saving one Thing, the sparkling, circling light descended in a spiral and whooshed up inside it hundreds and hundreds of astonished, delighted Things. Out of their dirty cages they rose, the tin and the cardboard, the wooden, the paper, and the plastic, each of them laughing as they were drawn into the sparkling, whirling cyclone. The furious, bewildered Loser didn't understand what was happening, and though he spun around trying to catch them, they slid through his long steel fingers and up toward the new hole their hope had made in the ceiling.

"They're going to be recycled!" Jack shouted as the monstrous creature tried to catch the Things rising so fast beyond his grip. "They'll be made new, Up There, and live again!"

"No!" shrieked the Loser, wild with rage. "People can't have them! They're mine, they're mine, they belong to me—"

From somewhere up above the glittering hole where the saved Things were disappearing, there came the chimes of a distant clock. It was midnight in the Land of the Living. Christmas Eve was finally ending.

"If I can't have them," screamed the enraged Loser, "I'll have *you!*!"

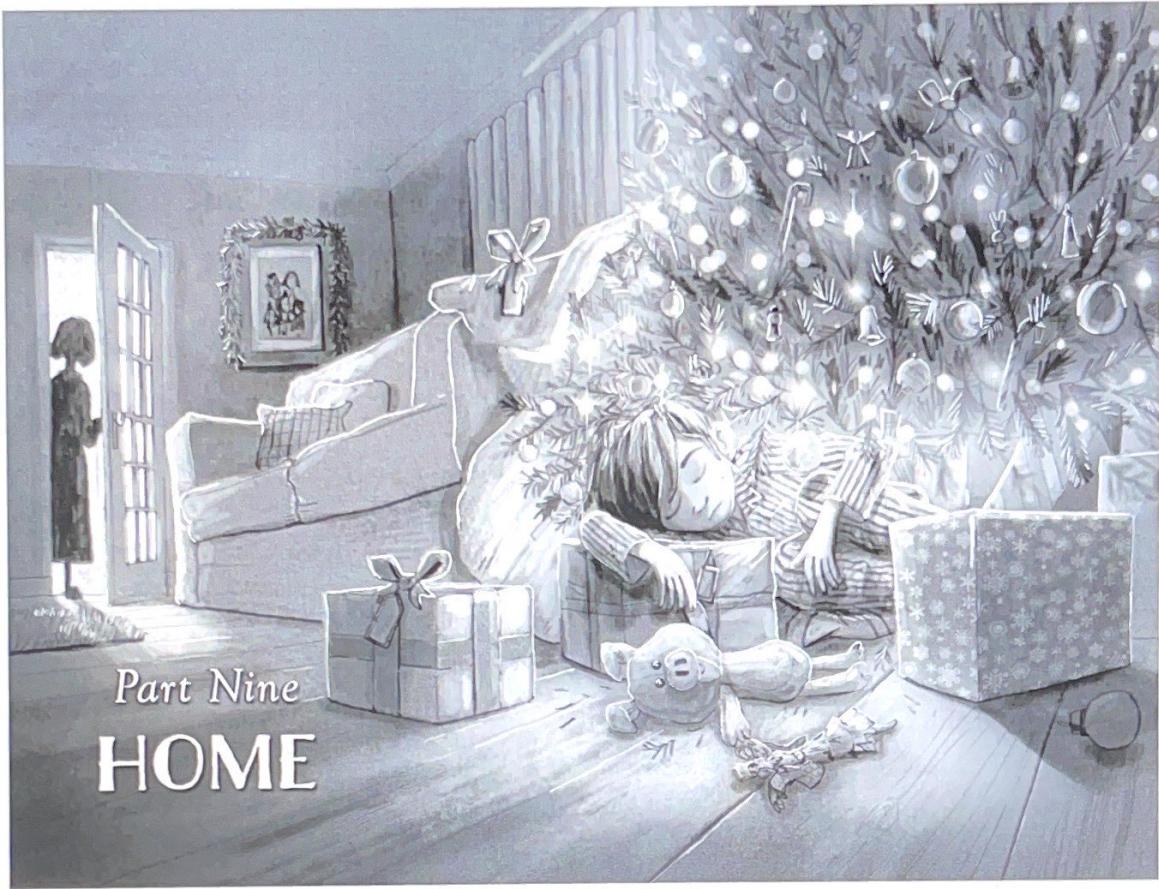
The Loser reached out his clawlike hands, with the fingers as long as steel girders, and Jack heard the chimes, and knew that hope wouldn't be enough now. The only comfort left in the world was the feel of the pig's trotter in his hand and he closed his eyes as the Loser's searchlight eyes grew nearer and brighter.

And then he felt himself

falling ...

falling ...

falling ...



Part Nine
HOME



FOUND

The smell of the Loser's breath had vanished. Still Jack fell, eyes tight shut, clutching the Christmas Pig's trotter, and he was scraped by sharp branches that smelled of pine, and down, down, down they fell until Jack felt ground beneath him. A distant voice was calling his name, a voice he knew.

"Hope?" he murmured.

A door opened.

"Jack?" said the voice, and then, "Jack! What are you doing under the tree? We've been looking for you everywhere!"

Jack opened his eyes. He was curled up on the floor beneath the Christmas tree at home, in the middle of all the presents, the tree lights

gleaming in the darkness above him. Pine needles were scattered all around him, and he'd returned to his normal size. The teddy bear-sized sweater had burst off him and now lay beside him in a tiny knitted ball. One hand was still holding the trotter of the Christmas Pig and there, her undamaged hand lying stretched out on the floor touching the Christmas Pig's other trotter, was Broken Angel.

"Brendan, I've found him!" called Mum, kneeling to look at Jack through the branches. "What are you doing under there, Jack? I went into your bedroom to give you a kiss and you'd gone. I was worried sick!"

She reached out a hand, and Jack crawled out from under the tree with CP in one hand and the broken angel in the other, and Mum pulled him into a hug and Jack hugged her back. It felt wonderful to be home again.

"I'm so sorry about DP," Mum whispered. "Grandpa told me what happened. When I didn't find you in bed, I thought you might have sneaked out to try and find him and I—"

"*I did go to look for DP!*" said Jack. "And I was just nearly eaten by the Loser, and I escaped, I don't know how—"

But then Jack spotted the shiny new bike with a big red ribbon on it, which was leaning up against the wall beside the tree, its handlebars touching the branches, and he pulled free of Mum to point at it.

"*That's how! Santa said* he might be able to help me later! He knocked the angel loose!"

"What?" said Mum, confused.

Jack showed Mum the chewed-up angel with her bent wing.

"She was caught in the branches at the back of the tree, see? But when Santa put my new bike there, he wobbled the tree on purpose and

knocked her free! So she wasn't lost anymore and she pulled me and the Christmas Pig with her, back into the Land of the Living!"

"Jack, *what* are you talking about?" said Mum, half laughing, half-worried. Brendan now hurried into the room and clapped his hand over his heart.

"Thank goodness for that," he said, looking at Jack. "We thought you were lost, buddy!"

"I *was!*" said Jack as Holly entered the room behind Brendan. Her eyes were still puffy, because she'd been crying so much, but she gave a huge gasp of relief when she saw Jack alive and well beside the Christmas tree.

"I was in the Land of the Lost!" Jack told them all. "Me and CP went there together! I found DP and he's happy—I always *knew* he liked the beach—and I met so many different Things—and there are all these different cities and the Loser nearly got me, but then Broken Angel saved us—we've got to keep her!" said Jack, thrusting the mangled angel under Mum's nose.

"Well," said Mum with a little laugh, as she took the angel from him, "she does look as though she belongs to this family, all right. I think she'd have been a bit grand for us before Toby-the-dog got her."

"You can bandage her up, can't you?" said Jack. "Like you did to DP, when he had his new eyes sewn on?"

"Of course," said Mum. Then she sniffed and said, "Why do you smell of smoke? And why are your pajamas so muddy?"

"Oh, the smell's the Loser's fire and the mud's from where Blue Bunny hugged me," said Jack. "It's hard to keep clean in the Land of the Lost."

"Well, I don't know about all that, but that pig definitely needs a wash."

"Not yet," said Jack, hugging the Christmas Pig to his chest. "He's quite scared of water at the moment, because he can't swim. That's why he's green. He nearly drowned in a canal. I'll need to explain to him about the washing machine before you put him in it, or he'll be really frightened. Anyway, I want to take him on a ride on my new bike before that. He likes bike rides. Santa told me."

"That was quite some dream you had," said Mum. "And you're not supposed to have seen that bike yet. It isn't Christmas Day."

"Actually," said Brendan, checking his watch, "it is. It's one minute past midnight."

"I'm hungry," said Jack. "I've been away three whole nights, and I couldn't eat the food in the Land of the Lost, because that would have proved I was a living boy. You don't believe me." Jack looked from Mum's face to Brendan's. They were both smiling in that annoying way grown-ups have, when they think they know better than you do what happened, even though you were there, and saw it all.

"Why don't I make some hot chocolate?" said Mum, still smiling. She carried Broken Angel out of the room. Brendan turned on the electric fire and went to help her in the kitchen, leaving Holly and Jack alone.

"I believe you were in the Land of the Lost," said Holly in a hoarse voice. "I do, Jack. And I'm glad you saw DP and that he's happy. And I'm sorry—so, so sorry—I threw him out of the car window."

"Well . . . it's all right," said Jack. "He's living in a nice little house on the beach with Toilet Roll Angel now. And I've got CP. DP says he's the best and bravest pig there ever was, and he's right."

"What else happened, while you were in the Land of the Lost?" Holly asked, and she and Jack sat down by the fire, and Jack told Holly all about Disposable and Sheriff Specs, about Lunch Box and Inhaler, about Bother-It's-Gone, Addie, and Poem, about their long journey

across the Wastes of the Unlamented, Compass, Blue Bunny, the strange Things he'd met in the City of the Missed, and their escape from the Loser's Lair.

"I know I've been horrible to you, Jack," said Holly, when at last he paused for breath. "And I promise I won't bully you, not ever again."

"I believe you," said Jack, remembering Bullyboss, whom he hadn't mentioned. CP was sitting on Jack's knee, so he could be warmed by the fire, too. "But I think you should stop doing gymnastics. I know you're not enjoying it anymore and you'd rather do music."

"How—*how* did you know that?" said Holly, amazed. "I haven't told *anyone!*"

"You find things out, in the Land of the Lost," said Jack wisely.

"I always thought I wanted to go to the Olympics," said Holly, looking into the fire, "but I really don't anymore. I'd rather see my friends at weekends, instead of practicing, practicing all the time."

"There's nothing wrong with losing an ambition," said Jack. "I met a lost ambition Down There, you know. She was horrible, but I'm sure you can get a nice new one."

"I'd like to learn the guitar," said Holly.

"Well, that's lucky," said Brendan, who'd come back into the room holding two big mugs of hot chocolate. "Judy and I have just agreed you can open one present each before you go back to bed. Holly, I think you should unwrap that big one, in the gold paper."

Jack untied the red ribbon on his new bike and showed the Christmas Pig all the features that made it such a particularly good one, while Holly tore the paper off her biggest present, to reveal a shiny black guitar. Then, while Holly was learning her first chord, Brendan helped Jack adjust the seat on his bike and Mum reappeared holding Broken Angel.

She'd wound a little strip of gauze around the angel's face to hide the bit that was missing, unbent her wing, and bandaged up her handless arm. Then Brendan, who was tallest, took the angel and placed her back at the top of the tree where she smiled down upon them all as proudly as if she'd been meant to be bandaged up all along.

"I like her," said Mum. "She looks kind, doesn't she? All right, you two, it's time for bed if you've finished that chocolate. We'll be up in a few hours, anyway."

So Jack and Holly climbed the stairs and said a friendly good night to each other on the landing. Then Holly disappeared into the spare room, and Mum came into Jack's room to kiss him good night.

None of the Things there were talking or moving anymore, and none of them had eyes or arms except those that had always had them. Jack snuggled up beneath his duvet and Mum kissed him, and then the Christmas Pig. She turned out the light and closed the door.

Jack lay cuddled up in bed breathing in CP's smell, which was of canal water and smoke, with a tiny trace of Mum's perfume. He'd have to go in the washing machine soon, but Jack knew he'd eventually come to smell of home, and of the warm cave under Jack's blankets.

"Good night, CP," whispered Jack. "Merry Christmas."

Exhausted from his adventures, Jack fell asleep almost at once.

It was no longer Christmas Eve, the night for miracles and lost causes, yet two little trotters hugged the sleeping boy in the darkness.

"Good night, Jack," whispered the little pig, whose tears of happiness were trickling down onto the pillow. "Merry Christmas to you, too!"